Community: Eclipsed or Resurgent?

By
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Abstract

The locus of community has been identified with the small town. With urbanization and industrialization, a shift occurred to spatially unbounded networks which are relationally defined and can be found in multiple contexts. The importance of community has long been recognized for both the individual and the society. Intentional communities represent attempts to create it. Examples include communes in the past, cohousing, gated communities, ecovillages and neighbornets. New Urbanist design attempts to create community through architecture and land use patterns, increasing the potential for people to come into contact with one another. The success of these efforts remains ambiguous. The Internet offers digital communities especially on social media sites. They represent a type of hybrid community today, a new structure. In the future, two demographic trends favor compact living arrangements and the potential for locality based community: the preferences of millennials who seem to want to abandon sprawling suburbs, and aging boomers who could benefit from the assistance of a supportive community. Environmental concerns and the need for action will also be locality based. Both the Internet and compact locality based communities offer the promise of social attachments, resurgent community. The limitation is in the homogeneity of the attachments. Bridging capital and coalitions of people who are different will be essential. Community, however, exists in a national and global context; acts of terrorism, the economy and national leadership make the future uncertain.

Keywords: community, social networks, intentional community, New Urbanism, hybrid communities, social capital, bridging capital, locality based community, resurgent community

INTRODUCTION

The recent presidential election in the United States, the Brexit vote in the UK and various other controversies and political movements in Europe have led to concerns about a growing polarization of citizens in these economically developed societies. There is a breakdown into 'us' and 'the other,' a desire on the part of some to strengthen national identities, to close and fortify borders, and to return to some sort of pre-globalized world where, in a nostalgic haze, the social and economic order appears more predictable and financially opportune. This stands in contrast to those who accept or even embrace more fluid borders, the economic and technological changes wrought by globalization, and in general, see their ideological opponents as reactionary, scapegoating specific groups, and evidencing bias. In this context, the need for community would appear to be more pressing than ever. How can citizens come together to understand diverse points of view and personal circumstances in order to craft, support, and implement policies that address the needs of all citizens?

The concept of community has been central to the work of sociologists since the earliest theorists. There

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has been broad agreement that community is the locus of social interaction where people share common interests, have a sense of belonging, experience solidarity and offer mutual assistance. Communities are recognized as essential for societal survival because they mediate between the individual and the larger society, are the arena for institutional participation, and thereby linked to democracy, and provide the context for social attachments and interdependencies. Community based social capital sustains individuals emotionally, contributes to their longevity and decreased morbidity, and also creates access to basic resources and information.

The locus of community has shifted from territory, rural and small town places, to social networks which may or may not be locality based. This shift came with urbanization and the seeming anonymity of city life. Community became identified as the Gemeinschaft of the small town in contrast to the urban Gesellschaft (Toennies 1887 [1957]). Eventually, however, city dwellers were found to be as socially connected as their small town counterparts. Their social connections, however, were much less likely to include neighbors. Networks, which fulfill the traditional functions of community, may be workplace based, centered in religious institutions or in self help groups, to note a few possibilities(Wellman and Leighton 1979; Chua, Madej and Wellman 2014). These networks may be long term or temporary, what Wuthnow calls 'loose connections' (Wuthnow 1998). Even while there are these spatially unbounded network systems, there are still traditional locality groups in city neighborhoods and small towns. Today the researcher must investigate whether the relationships we identify with 'community' exist in any number of social contexts.

More recently attention has shifted to digital networks, online communities which may be based on common interests such as self help or video gaming, or social media websites where people maintain contacts with a variety of other people. Much has been written about whether these kinds of contacts in a virtual world can be a replacement for face-to-face interaction. Networks, which can be deleted by a simple click, do not seem to have the same binding or shaming power as a territorially based community. Research, however, is generally positive. People use online networks to supplement face-to-face interaction and they may encourage institutional participation as well, such as political engagement (Chua, Madej and Wellman 2014). The shift has been from spatially bounded communities to those that are relationally defined, personal communities with specialized ties.

So when we consider the construction of the concept of community by theorists and reflect on the changes in it over the past two centuries, clearly community is multiple in nature. It assumes a variety of forms and it would be a misrepresentation to try to impose a singular locus for it. Community reflects the fragmentation of postmodern times; it is a slippery concept, a variable to be investigated.

The predominant bias has been to assume that communities must be territorially based. There has also been a tendency to define the true community as one where there is diverse membership, whether by culture, race or social class. Groups of like minded individuals who share common interests such as seniors in a retirement development built around a golf course are not true communities. They are instead what Bellah labeled 'life style enclaves' (Bellah et al.1985). People relish their similarities with others and they have minimal contact with people who are different from themselves. In the recent polarizing election, reflective of political party demographic profiles, the data showed that Democrats and Republicans tend to be spatially separated. Most people live in bubbles amidst like minded others (Pew Research 2014). Technology further enables the separation as people construct their own online networks which can be even more exclusive than brick and mortar neighborhoods. The media today is plural enough that people can select news programs that reinforce their own political predilections with little exposure to differing opinions. Communities today are plural in form but there are only limited examples of their meeting some ideal of diverse membership. Diversity becomes a variable which may or may not characterize a community, and more often than not, it is only minimally present or restricted to age differences.

The connectedness of community has long been recognized as important and there have been many attempts to deliberately form settlements which embody the ideal of collective life. These loosely can be placed under the category of intentional communities (Fellowship for Intentional Community 2016). Examples from the past include the Oneida commune and various Shaker villages. These were deliberate

attempts to realize a vision of interdependent living which was spatially grounded. More contemporary examples of planned communities include gated communities which have been very popular in the US especially in California and Florida, and today are also a residence of choice by an increasing number of middle and upper middle class people in the developing world. In this latter case, they offer the opportunity for separation from the poor, and because of strict regulations, they promise predictability in an ordered environment. Planned communities, for the most part, are not economically diverse although there are some notable exceptions such as Reston, Virginia and Columbia, Maryland. With their own private services and recreational facilities, they are criticized for turning their backs upon the larger town or city of which they are a part. Gated communities are marketed to people offering a secure environment and vibrant community life. The former is not necessarily true; crime rates may not be any lower than outside the gates; likewise, walling people off does not necessarily guarantee community involvement or enduring social bonds (Wilson-Doenges 2000). People are often content to have a homeowners association and elected officers handle their affairs and opt for the same level of interaction with neighbors as in traditional neighborhoods. In this regard, community is a construction of the marketing agent, a tool used for selling purposes only. Gated communities may be physically demarcated but may not be an intentional community after all on an interactional level (Blakely and Snyder 1997).

Another type of intentional community is that of cohousing which began in Denmark and was brought to the US largely through the efforts of Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett (McCamant and Durrett 1994). One estimate puts the number of cohousing developments in the US at 160 in 25 states with another 120 under construction (Cohousing Association of the US April 2016). With cohousing, people usually own their housing unit but share public spaces and community buildings like a recreational hall or dining area. Here are staging areas for collective events like shared meals, games, and a variety of leisure activities. A mix of old and young people may address the needs of different groups like ready-made babysitters and neighbors to look out for elders. Cohousing allows people to select a point on the individualism/collectivism spectrum which is physically facilitated by the arrangement: they may both enjoy private home ownership and an array of public spaces for collective life. Unlike a condominium complex with a homeowners' association, cohousing does signify some commitment to a communal ideal that goes beyond shared recreational facilities. Cohousing requires enough acreage for a sufficient number of housing units to be built as well as for shared, public spaces. Front end costs are high. There are current developments and proposed developments in both rural and urban areas.

A striking example of an intentional community today is the Treehouse Community in East Hampton, MA. http://refca.net/community/treehouse-easthampton/multi-generational-community. It consists of 12 single family homes with three, four or five bedrooms and forty eight one bedroom cottages designed for senior citizens. There is a community center as a central gathering space. It was designed to support families who are fostering or adopting children from the public foster care system in recognition of the failure of that system for children who bounce from one placement to another. The seniors who are attracted to Treehouse want to contribute to the well being of the young and they donate countless hours in transportation, cooking and painting lessons, bike riding and generally are like supportive grandparents. Currently there are over 100 people ages three to ninety, living at the Treehouse community. Both children's and adults' lives are enriched by vibrant, engaged community where people celebrate life together. Teahouse can be contrasted with the large numbers of retirement communities across the country which are intentional but which are age segregated, often restricted to those over 55. Research on those kinds of retirement villages usually does find that most people in fact prefer the segregation. They enjoy having children visit but appreciate that when they leave, they take their noisiness and disruptive behaviors with them.

Although residents of cohousing developments are generally concerned about the environment, there is another kind of intentional community, ecovillages, where people with a commitment to sustainable living try to limit their footprint on the earth. Building materials are carefully selected, energy sources are renewable, and land use designs preserve as much open space as possible. Consumerism is minimized; recycling and composting are emphasized. We find ecovillages in the developing world as well.

In these examples of intentional communities, it is essential to note the efforts of the New Urbanists. The term, 'New Urbanism,' covers urban planning and design principles which attempt to create a sense of community through architecture and land use patterns. Essentially the vision is neo-traditional, trying to restore the feel of a small town of the past with compact neighborhoods, smaller homes, walkability, town centers, front porches and a deemphasized automobile. Design principles are employed to bring people into contact with one another as opposed to sprawling, anonymous suburbs where people are mostly inside their homes or in their backyards rather than in the public spaces meeting one another. Well known examples are Seaside and Celebration in Florida. Whether or not the New Urbanism achieves its goals is still an ongoing research question: while there sometimes seems to be more interaction in these places, there is uncertainty over whether it is because of social homogeneity or is the result of the design process (Alzaidan 2012).

Finally, when considering intentional communities, there are the examples of "neighbornets." Here we have established local areas where a few individuals deliberately try to develop and strengthen social ties such as through communal projects. Neighbornets can be an effective tool for building a sense of neighborliness and involvement in an area. Many neighborhoods and apartment buildings today have their own websites and the research about their impact is positive (NeighborNets Network 1999).

It seems likely that given the individualization of the society, people will continue to choose a community reflective of their values and priorities, and that what we will see is an expansion of the possible variations and differentiations. For example, rather than simply communities of LGBTQ people, there are communities of aging LGBTQ members, or retired academics who choose to live around universities; communities of people who want to share in some agricultural pursuits (agrihoods), (Scher 2016) communities of young families looking for a child friendly environment, or communities of women.

The Future

The future of community in the US, on the one hand, is a hopeful one. People are more connected today to a greater number of people. They have multiple networks of connections. This is most evident on social media sites. Usually the digital exchange supplements face-to-face interaction. What would have been dormant ties, such as those to high school classmates, may remain active across any distance and over time. People can alert others to problems they are facing and reach out for help and resources. These media sites are also the source for news and narratives about the political, economic and social worlds. Opinions are shaped and reinforced in the exchanges and links; actors may be mobilized to vote, join a demonstration, send emails or contributions. The result is people who are connected to others and institutions which may be infused by their participation.

On the other hand, some argue that digital communities may be more fragile and easily deleted or ignored, that the information conveyed on social media sites may even be fake; that digital communities are intentionally constructed by the individual as socially exclusive; anyone who is annoying or too oppositional may be dropped (e. g., de-friended) unlike a conventional neighborhood where one has to learn to live with the obnoxious neighbor. There is the opportunity, of course, for anti social behavior such as bullying and the promotion of violent crowd behavior. In general, however, the very high percentage of Americans using social media today is an indicator of connections rather than anomie or isolation.

On the other hand, even as people may be more socially connected today through technology, two concerns remain:

1. the problem of place and the degree of locality involvement;
2. the question of diversity. Must community be diverse in its membership? Most people in the United States live in areas segregated by class, race, and ethnicity.

With regard for the first concern, our institutions have local outlets for national systems whether it is schools, churches, political parties, health care, etc. The vitality of our societal system depends on the participation of people locally. We need the active PTA's, church groups, voting, medical personnel providing care, recreational activities provided by local budgets, and of course, the innumerable businesses which offer good and services to people on a territorial basis. Robert Putnam's book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) highlighted what he saw as a decline in social capital. In local areas people know fewer neighbors, interact less frequently and are

more disengaged politically. There is a decline in the membership of traditional civic organizations. We do see some weakening of functioning localities; people shopping online may mean fewer trips to local stores and even groceries may be delivered by Amazon today. Other institutions, however, especially elementary and secondary schools and our political process are locally grounded.

The local area is essential to our democracy and for the raising of our children. Place matters even as the Internet tears down the notion of spatial boundaries. If a natural disaster strikes, local towns people will be there to help before the National Guard. In the future, place or locality is likely to become even more prominent as the arena where concerns about the environment and climate change are played out. Concerns about climate change and sustainability are best addressed in our own backyard and the urgent nature of these issues may foreshadow more local involvement. So here is a possible impetus for strengthening place based ties. The Internet will be central for organizing people around these issues.

With more focus on the environment, the potential is there for better use of resources, compact urban planning rather than sprawl which is inefficient and wasteful of land and automobile dependent. Planned communities, whether gated or not, retirement villages, ecovillages or cohousing, are all responsive to more compact settlements. People accustomed to choices in housing will expand the market for many possible variations along the invidualism/collectivism spectrum. A recent trend that is noteworthy is that millennials (people ages 18-34) who number 7.7 million, the same number as the boomer generation, prefer to live in urban areas over the suburbs or rural areas (Nielson 2014). They desire the proximity to shops, restaurants, and workplaces, and are currently living in the higher density areas at a higher rate than any generation. Forty percent would like to live in an urban area in the future. The Nielson report depicted the trend as the transition from the white picket fence of the suburbs to the brownstone stoop in the city. Along with convenience, they seek an exciting art and music scene. Millenials are also less likely to own cars. Vehicle ownership rates declined from 73% in 2007 to 66% in 2011 among those under 25. Here is a market ripe for new urbanist design. As they become parents, millennials will have more need for communal supports especially when family members may live in distant places.

At the same time as the millennials put down roots, the boomer generation is aging with the first cohort having reached age 70. As they downsize and make housing choices, here too is a population potentially receptive to more collectivized living with retirement villages or apartment buildings of seniors. Like millenials with children who need social supports and who benefit from the proximity of other families, so too will aging boomers need their own networks of care and assistance. Both groups presage the potential for more compact locality based housing arrangements.

Diversity

Numerous studies have documented the high levels of residential segregation in the United States. Even theorists like Robert Putnam who cherishes the diversity ideal, had to acknowledge, based on the Social Capital Benchmark Survey (2000), that in ethnically diverse neighborhoods, people of all races tend to withdraw more from collective life, distrust neighbors, expect the worse from their community and vote less (Putnam 2006). Even with economic control variables introduced, the more we 'are brought into physical proximity with people of another race or ethnicity, the more we stick to our own and the less we trust the other.' Diversity in community remains an ideal as people choose to live near people who are like them. PEW Research did find an ideological divide on this with liberals more likely to embrace diversity than conservatives.

CONCLUSION

When we reflect upon the trends today, the demographics of boomers and millennials and both their needs and preferences, may encourage compact settlements which theoretically, enable more physical contacts among people. It is not a guarantee for social bonding but sets up the potential. In all likelihood more dense settlements will consist of people who are socially and economically similar. Those that might be diverse are more likely to attract liberals. One could be optimistic, however, that just as the 'us' versus 'them' categories of 1900 eventually disappeared, immigrant differences which are so prominent today will also fade.

Environmental issues like climate change, fracking, energy projects and water quality are likely to bring

together people united around particular controversies which will create social capital. Community forms in opposition. Broader coalitions are possible which may afford linkages with people who are dissimilar. A recent example would be that of the Standing Rock Sioux who were joined by other Native groups, by environmentalists, and ultimately by Veterans of many racial and ethnic backgrounds in their fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline. People come together when they realize it adds to their strength and resources.

Demographic trends favoring compact settlements and environmental concerns which will need to be addressed, favor local areas as the staging arena. Place still matters and territorial community will not be eclipsed. The challenge will be for bridging capital so that people in homogenous areas are linked with those who are different. Coalition building will be the key.

The counterforce is the digital world which eradicates spatial constraints and boundaries. Here we find millions of people connected especially on social media. A new form of community has emerged, a resurgent hybrid (Hampton 2016). Even as there are networks of spatially unbounded ties, there is a persistent-pervasive community structure like that of preindustrial times. People know what others are eating or where they are going on a daily basis. People watch one another and gossip over a digital fence. We have to recognize this as a hybrid community structure, emergent from current technology, and not simply try to compare it to our small town models of the past. Like everything postmodern, community is multiple and must be studied and understood in all these variations, Digital connections are full of potential for community bonds and action but they have the same shortfalls as territorial community in that they are likely to be homogenous. The technology must be harnessed in pursuit of community and not used as a tool for cyber attacks on outsider groups.

Even with a modicum of optimism about the future of communities, however, there is the recognition that they are set in a national and global context. Global terrorist acts may lead people to withdraw into what they perceive as their familiar safe communities or their families. Leadership on the national level, however, can help promote communal association. In the late 1960's there was Federal legislation to support 'new communities,' planned communities with social, spatial, and economic goals. Under George Bush funds were channeled through faith based local groups to assist in meeting the challenges of several different social problems. National leadership may also unwittingly encourage community by creating oppositional networks of people which if broadly based, may give rise to diverse coalitions of people who organize to protest Federal or state policies. Unfortunately national leadership can also contribute to 'us versus they' divisions especially in immigration policies. So even as the demographics, environmental concerns and the technology of social media point in the direction of resilient and resurgent communities, the larger global, political and economic context remains uncertain.

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